Equality of Opportunity and Freedom from Discrimination

MHR Connections

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Speaker/singer/songwriter wows students at the DREAM Human Rights Youth Conference

Keith Macpherson told students to ignore their inner "saboteur" and encouraged them to stand up and dream big.

For many students learning about human rights and discrimination at the Manitoba Human Rights Commission's DREAM Youth Conference was "awesome" and "inspiring."

First, 160 students and teachers from rural Manitoba arrived in Shilo, Manitoba early on Tuesday, April 15th. Just before the conference a "flash mob" by Steppin' Time Dance Studio students from Brandon left students surprised, smiling and ready for the day's events.

Keith Macpherson, Manitoba singer/songwriter/speaker wowed the students at the Brandon Conference and the next day in Winnipeg. Through stories and songs he spoke to the students about their "inner saboteur" – that part of our subconscious that Keith says hold us back and prevents us from moving forward or doing the right thing. The saboteur, he says, affects your confidence and self esteem.

At times, students nodded in agreement; at other times, they laughed; sometimes they sang along. Reaction to Keith ranged from amazing to educating to entertaining.

Students and teachers also reacted to the guests on the DREAM Panel. In Brandon, Grace Kang, Corey Cook and Bowen Wallis took part. Grace described her experience with poverty while Corey spoke of a life surrounded by drugs, alcohol, gangs and abuse. His dream was a better life and he achieved it. Student Bowen Wallis rounded out the panel. He fascinated the audience with his experience of finding a cause to support, raising money and finding the right charity to make sure the funds raised went directly to the people. All this advice came from a grade 6 student.

In Winnipeg Sybil Shack Human Rights Award Recipient Megan Fultz joined the dream panel. She said she did not really believe people had disabilities, but rather varying

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The Rights Connection
by Azim Jiwa - Executive Director

My first youth conference

As I made my introductory remarks to the students at the DREAM Youth Conferences, I admitted to them that this was my first human rights youth conference, as well as theirs.

When I first became Executive Director of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, I was excited about the youth initiatives. It was, to my thinking, a perfect way to make sure that youth understood their rights and carried that message forward.

The image I had of the youth conferences quickly became a reality. I admit one aspect took me by complete surprise. It was the remarkable energy that permeated the entire day. The conferences were fully charged.

In Shilo, the charge was ignited by the Steppin' Time Dancers who started a flash mob just before the conference started. In Winnipeg the dancers were not present, but the staff took over, resulting in the same energy burst that remained for much of the day.

Listening to Keith Macpherson as the Keynote Speaker and hearing the inspiring words of the DREAM Panel, while watching the students react to their messages, were highlights for me. Each young panel guest moved the audience in their own way and contributed to students understanding of discrimination based on poverty, ancestry, and as one speaker, Meagan Fultz said, varying abilities.

And perhaps my favourite secret smile moment was listening to young Bowen Wallis, a grade 6 student from Erickson Elementary School. After his personal success raising money to build a school in rural China, he advised students at the conference on how to take on similar projects and choose the right charity to ensure the money raised gets to the appropriate person.

The DREAM Conference was the perfect name for a conference where the goal is to not only inspire and motivate students, but also to reach out to individual students and let them know that they can control how they think and feel. As Keith Macpherson would say, don't let that inner saboteur stop you from reaching your potential. If you believe it will be a good day, chances are it will. If your fear or lack of confidence is saying, you can't do it, believe you can.

Congratulations to the staff and participants.

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degrees of abilities. She also spoke on the bullying she received when younger and how she rose above it.

The Winnipeg conference was filled to capacity with 200 students and teachers attending. Not only were Winnipeg schools represented but also school from Sagkeeng Junior High and Juniper School in Thompson.

Both conferences were opened by Azim Jiwa Executive Director of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission, who explained why it was called The DREAM Conference. "We decided to call this our "DREAM Conference" because human rights began as a dream of equality for all, he said. "We believe that this conference will lead you on your own human rights path."

Steppin' Time Dancers immerge from the audience and head for the stage as Pharrel Williams' hit song "Happy" starts up.

T-shirts become canvases for art and words of wisdom.

"Ability is a spectrum. I can sing and play an instrument but I can't run a marathon." Megan Fultz

In Shilo, Base Commander Lieutenant-Colonel Stephen D. Joudrey also welcomed the students saying he wished he had had an opportunity to attend a conference like this when he was young. He added he was confident that the youth here today would have an impact over the next fifty years.

Youth Conference Co- Chair Pam Roberts commended all of the teachers who brought students to these conferences. "These teachers recognize that young people need to know about not only their rights in Manitoba, but also the responsibilities that they have to protect the rights of others. The students have unlimited potential and the ripple effect is awesome. They are not only working to create respectful schools, but they are working to create a respectful, healthier, discrimination free global community."

It is apparent that each year these conferences become bigger and more popular than the year before. With that in mind, planning is already underway for the 2015 conferences. The Commission is looking at Grades 6 – 8, as all indicators suggest that these students are at a perfect age to be having human rights and responsibilities discussions. Announcements about future conferences will be posted on Facebook and the Commission's website.

Complaint leads to changes to Vital Statistics Act

The Manitoba Human Rights Commission is pleased with the direction of proposed changes to the Vital Statistics Act, which will no longer require a Manitoban to have transsexual surgery in order to change his or her sex designation on a birth certificate. Bill 56 (The Vital Statistics Amendment Act) was introduced on April 24, 2014.

The Executive Director of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission Azim Jiwa says that the change is a welcome one. "In the past, proof of transsexual surgery was required. A human rights complaint by one individual has led the way to a systemic resolution."

The Human Rights Commission informed Vital Statistics Agency of the complaint and as a result of mediation, the Agency formed working groups with various stakeholders to review the Act and propose changes.

Ontario was the first jurisdiction in Canada to make similar changes to its criteria. In April 2012 an Ontario Human Rights Tribunal found that legislation requiring a person to have transsexual surgery before they can change the sex designation on their birth registration was discriminatory. The ruling said that requiring surgery adds to the disadvantage and stigma experienced by members of the community, and reinforces the stereotype that transgender persons must have surgery in order to live in their felt gender.

In Manitoba under the proposed legislation, a person who was born in Manitoba can apply to change his or her birth registration and birth certificate through a statutory declaration and the written support of a health care professional. A Canadian citizen resident in Manitoba for at least one year can apply for a change of sex designation certificate based on similar criteria.

The term 'transgender' refers to people whose sense of self, particularly their sense of being male or female, is different than social expectations based on their birth-assigned sex. It includes transsexuals, intersex individuals and other people.

In 2012 changes to *The Human Rights Code* (Manitoba) saw gender identity and social disadvantage added to the list of characteristics protected from discrimination.

On April 17, 2014 many people visited the Commission's booth on Law Day to ask questions and play the following quiz. Fran Wiebe won a gift certificate to McNally Robinson Booksellers for playing.

1. What legislation protects you from discrimination in Manitoba?
   a) The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
   b) The Human Rights Code (Manitoba)
   c) The Canadian Human Rights Act
2. In what year was Manitoba's Human Rights Code amended to include protection from discrimination based on social disadvantage and gender identity?
   a) 1987 b) 2008 c) 2012
3. About 75 per cent of human rights complaints in Manitoba are in the area of:
   a) employment b) housing c) services
4. What is the most common basis of complaint filed at the human rights commission?
   a) disability b) age c) religion

Answers: 1. (b) 2. (c) 3. (a) 4. (a)